

Grammar Mini-Lesson: Double Negatives

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Definition

Formerly a forceful or lively way of adding character and impact to statements, the use of a **double negative** in Standard English is no longer considered grammatically correct. The error of the double negative comes in the combination of the negative form of verb (e.g. cannot, did not, have not) with a negative pronoun (e.g. nothing, nobody), adverb (e.g. never, hardly) or conjunction (e.g. neither, nor) in a single clause.

Grade Level

Grade 9, and any level of ESL. Double negatives are often used by youth, native speakers included, in colloquial terms and targeting its usage at the start of high school is the most logical. Moreover, in many languages other than English the double negative is grammatically appropriate thus being of great benefit to English Language Learners.

Common Errors and Corrections

- Common error: lack of clarity
- Correct usage: to express reservation, understated affirmation or character-trait

Activity

- 1) Ask students to work in pairs to create a dialogue to be performed
- 2) Have pairs assign themselves roles; the first being only able to speak in double negatives, the second in Standard English
- 3) At least three examples of double negatives and the grammatically correct versions. In addition, give an example of a correct situation in which to use the double negative
- 4) Emphasize creativity in the dialogue, the more comedic or dramatic the better
- 5) Perform, followed by review of student examples at the end.

Resources

Double Negatives. (2012) In *Oxford Dictionaries Online*. Retrieved on January 20, 2012, from <http://oxforddictionaries.com/words/double-negatives>.

Mencken, H.L. (1921). Ch. 8 The Double Negative. In *The American Language*. Available from <http://www.bartleby.com/185/45.html>.

Nordquist, Richard. (n.d.). Double Negative. In *About.com Grammar & Composition*. Retrieved on January 20, 2012, from <http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/doubnegterm.htm>.

Worksheet: **Double Negatives**

Name: _____

Correct the following famous, but arguably grammatically erroneous lines, by removing the double negative:

(e.g.) Original: “You better not never tell nobody but God.”
- Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982)

Correction: “You better not tell anybody but God”

1) “I won’t not use no double negatives.”

- Bart Simpson, *The Simpsons* (1999)

2) “I don’t want no sympathy from you.”

- *Can’t Hardly Wait* (1998)

3) “Nor never none / Shall mistress of it be, save I alone.”

- William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (1602)

4) “The well-nigh universal forms [of the Americans] are ‘I don’t see nobody,’ ‘I couldn’t hardly walk,’ and ‘I don’t know nothing about it.’”

- H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (1921)

5) “Mr. Sherlock Holmes, who was usually very late in the mornings, save upon those not infrequent occasions when he was up all night, was seated at the breakfast table.”

- Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, (1902)

Proper Double Negative Use

When used to emphasize subtleties in affirmation or reservation the double negative can be employed (in some cases).

(e.g.) “It is hoped that American teachers may *not* find this Manual *inappropriate* to their use.”

- J.M. Bonnell, *A Manual of the Art of Prose Composition* (1867)

(e.g.) “She is not unattractive”

With this new condition in mind, can any of the corrected examples above be defended?

Create on your own an example of proper double negative use: